

Why cultural meanings matter in endangered language research

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In this paper we illustrate why it is important for linguists engaged in endangered language documentation to develop an analytical understanding of the cultural meanings that language, language loss, and language documentation have for the communities they work with. Acknowledging the centrality of cultural meanings has implications for the kinds of questions linguists ask about the languages they are studying. For example: How is age interpreted? What reactions are provoked by accented speech or multilingualism? Is language shift experienced as a painful loss, or a source of newfound freedom, or both? It affects the standards we set for what counts as a satisfying explanation for language endangerment, with prediction necessarily limited in sociogeographic scope. It has implications for the research methods employed, calling for serious engagement with the particular histories and interpretive practices of local linguistic communities. Analyzing cultural meanings can help us see how language use and changes in language use are experienced and therefore acted on by people whose communicative behavior we are concerned with. It can help us interpret why language shift is taking place in a particular community, guide the practices of language documentation and preservation that linguists engage in with that community, and contribute to effective revitalization.

1. Introduction In this paper we illustrate why it is important for linguists engaged in endangered language documentation to develop an analytical understanding of the cultural meanings that language, language loss, and language documentation have for the communities they work with. A number of publications make the claim that ethnography has a prominent role to play in linguistic field research, both as a form of knowledge and as a method that can lead to that knowledge (Hymes 1971[1962]; Harrison 2005; Hill

2006; Ahlers 2009; Dobrin 2008; Dobrin and Berson 2011; Sicoli 2011; Childs, Good, and Mitchell 2014; Di Carlo 2016; Dobrin and Schwartz 2016). Yet the basic message of these publications—that cultural factors cannot be treated as an externality to documentary linguistics without compromising both the research process and its outcomes—has not had a great impact on the field. For example, the message does not generally hold a prominent place in linguistic field methods courses or other kinds of training given to linguistics students preparing for fieldwork. Whereas discourses of research ethics and community collaboration have become ubiquitous and students of documentary linguistics are now systematically conversant in them, students are not being similarly introduced to participant observation as a method that can contribute to the development of cultural understanding, or being urged to familiarize themselves with the major themes in the anthropological literature on the areas where they plan to work.¹ In this respect, there is still room for growth in the field of documentary linguistics that Himmelmann's pivotal (1998) publication helped create. Himmelmann (2008: 338) recognized this as a problem for the field:

For most research areas of concern to core linguistics, e.g., grammatical theory or typology, it is not clear to what extent the disregard for social aspects of language structure and use compromises research goals and outcomes. However, this disregard is indeed harmful to a number of topic areas. One of these areas is large-scale language endangerment....

[T]he essentially a-social conceptualization of linguistic knowledge within mainstream structural linguistics... has delegated to the subfield of sociolinguistics (broadly conceived, including anthropological linguistics) the investigation of all social aspects of language structure and use. In putting language endangerment on the mainstream agenda, structural linguistics has added another issue to the growing list of items that second guess the wisdom of excluding from its core agenda almost all regard for the ways in which linguistic knowledge is socially constructed and reproduced.

So in this paper we lay out a number of ways in which cultural meanings matter for the study of endangered languages, from interpreting why language shift is taking place in a particular local community, to helping guide the practices of language documentation and preservation that linguists engage in with that community, to planning for effective revitalization.

Acknowledging the centrality of cultural meaning has implications for the kinds of questions linguists ask about the languages they are studying. For example: How is age interpreted? What reactions are provoked by accented speech or multilingualism? Is language shift experienced as a painful loss, or a source of newfound freedom, or both? It affects the standards we set for what counts as a satisfying explanation for language endangerment, with prediction necessarily limited in sociogeographic scope. It also has implications for the methods employed, calling for serious engagement with the particular histories and interpretive practices of local linguistic communities (Di Carlo 2016; Di

¹Collaborating with researchers who have different disciplinary skill sets may also be desirable, but it cannot take the place of developing one's own understanding of key cultural themes that connect language with other domains of social life in an intended area of fieldwork, as these will affect language use and distribution, undergird patterns of shift, and have implications for revitalization interventions. Entering a community as a fieldworker comes with personal responsibility.

Carlo and Good 2017; Good and Di Carlo in press; Lüpke and Storch 2013). This includes, but goes beyond, uncovering the attitudes and beliefs people have about language—the linguistic ideologies they hold—in the sense of associations with whole codes such that people find them good to speak or not speak. It also means understanding the cultural mechanisms that help construct those ideologies and hold them in place within webs of meaning and action (see, e.g., Schieffelin, Woolard, and Kroskrity 1998; Irvine and Gal 2000). Ideologies are more than series of associations; they are like the grammar of social life that tie patterns of activity, ideas, and affect together. And they are often unconscious: there may be indicators in the things people say, but they will rarely arise as the answers to overt questions. Analyzing these kinds of meanings can help us see how language use, and changes in language use, are experienced and therefore acted on by the people whose communicative behavior we are concerned with.

2. Shift There have been a number of efforts to describe and analyze the factors and forces involved in language shift, culminating recently in a call for linguists to develop a generalized predictive model of “why and how some languages become endangered, die, survive threats to them, or even thrive” (Mufwene 2017: e202, n.2). Yet the substantial literature already directed toward this end seems to have reached a limit: Pauwel’s (2016) textbook *Language Maintenance and Shift* winds up its assessment of the current state of knowledge about language shift dynamics by saying,

the majority of factors that have been discovered and examined in relation to [language maintenance] or [language shift] seldom have the same impact across... settings or linguistic groups.... As a result, [we have] not yet been able to come up with a convincing model or theory that can predict, reliably, which factors or combinations of factors lead to a specific outcome. (98)

This is borne out by two of the articles responding to Mufwene’s call, which diverge in their assessment of something as basic as speaker numbers, with Bower (2017) citing work that upholds the generalization that small population size is a driver of language shift, and Lüpke (2017) arguing forcefully that in an African context it is not.

In approaching the question of how and why shift takes place linguists have tended to rely on categories like speaker numbers, domains of use, utility for employment, etc. that can be treated as independent variables. Yet there is an almost unimaginable range of ways in which language can be refracted through cultural categories and practices. This means that even common factors will not always be commensurable. Take, for example, something as seemingly straightforward as age distribution. When working with Kaska teenagers in the Yukon, Meek (2007) found that their association of the language with authority had become so strong that it shaped both what teens would say in the language (they used it especially for directives) and their understanding that elders were the only social group that properly spoke the language, which reinforced shift. When working with bilingual indigenous Mixe speakers, Suslak (2009) found that code switching with Spanish held different meanings across generations, with youth spurning their parents’ mixing of the two languages as sloppy and careless, while they expressed their own sophistication by attending to the language boundary so carefully that it led them to hypercorrect. Treating age as a variable that can be straightforwardly compared across settings misses the way language shift is shaped by these kinds of local meanings.

Scholars going back at least to the 1960s have been producing “lists, typologies or taxonomies of factors and variables” (Pauwels 2016: 105) meant to explain the dynamics

of language maintenance vs. shift (Ferguson 1962; Stewart 1968; Haugen 1972; see also Campbell 2017). Probably the most comprehensive of these is presented in Grenoble and Whaley (1998), which builds on prior work by John Edwards (1992). Grenoble and Whaley identify economics as “the single strongest force influencing the fate of endangered languages” and attribute to it “the potential...to outweigh all others combined” (1998: 52, 31). Yet they also acknowledge that “it is at the level of micro-variables where one can account for how differences in the rate, outcome, and reversibility of language-shift cases come about” (1998: 28). Micro-variables, “characteristics which are unique to specific speech communities,” cannot be entirely equated with cultural factors, but they often have a cultural component. For example, the impact of literacy in a community must take account of its “*social meaning*... a set of micro-variables which involve the attitudes, beliefs, and values of a community” (Grenoble and Whaley 1998: 33). Just what kinds of “social meanings” might be involved? Here lies the problem with any “ready typology of language shift that we can apply consistently across cultures” (Sicoli 2011: 163). Preselecting the categories deemed to be relevant—no matter how expansive—limits our ability to learn how language shift is structured and experienced in a given local situation (Dobrin 2010).

Consider the transmission of Eastern Tukanoan languages in the multilingual Vaupés region of the northwest Amazon described by Janet Chernela and others. In this part of the world, language loss and maintenance are both going on at once in the same households as the ordinary state of affairs. In fact, Chernela (2004: 13) explicitly compares the language situation in the Vaupés to that of immigrants in the U.S. whose children know their home languages but grow up to not use them. The Vaupés culture area is known for its linguistic exogamy: people marry outside their own language group, with marriage to a fellow speaker held to be incestuous because language is culturally construed as an embodied substance passed down through descent (Chernela 2018). This practice, along with patrilocal residence, results in a situation where children are raised in bilingual households but nevertheless become monolingual speakers of their father’s language. At the same time, knowledge of the mother’s language is suppressed and stigmatized, although not forgotten, making this a place in which people are monolingual speakers, but bilingual hearers. Moreover, “every attempt is made to avoid hybridization, since it is considered essential that linguistic identities remain distinct and linguistic boundaries be kept stable” (Chernela 2004: 15). In the social-symbolic configurations created through these cultural practices, monolingualism is associated with men, whereas women often end up speaking their parents’ language peripherally, when at home with their children and with fellow in-married women who happen to hail from their original language group. Monolingualism is culturally elaborated as a display of self-discipline associated especially with males, whereas multilingualism and code-switching are felt to be feminine, chaotic, and politically destabilizing. Lapses in monolingual self-control are thus cause for humiliation and shame in men, leading them to deny that they ever code-switch, even though they sometimes do so in order to facilitate communication with their in-laws. As children begin producing their first utterances, their mothers guide them away from their own language and instead toward the father’s by use of feigned incomprehension or outright correction, making the process of language learning, in Chernela’s words, “an early form of mother-separation” (2004: 19). In its preferred form, marriage is to the child of a mother’s brother, so later in life there is often a return to the mother’s language in speech between spouses, which transforms the suppressed language of mother-infant intimacy into “the language of affect and libido” (Chernela 2004: 19). In short, while the

linguistic outcome for individuals might be similar to what we find among children of immigrants shifting to English in the U.S., the cultural bases for the outcome are all but incomparable and could hardly have been imagined without in-depth ethnographic study.

Cultural meanings can remain constant even as language change takes place, so that they form part of the logic that organizes shift as a social process. Perhaps the best-known example of this is Kulick's (1992) study of language shift in Gapun village in the New Guinea Sepik. Another example comes from Dobrin's work on coastal varieties of Mountain Arapesh in Papua New Guinea, which are now spoken almost exclusively by elders and may soon cease to be spoken at all. In Arapesh communities, as elsewhere in Melanesia, many high-status cultural forms are acquired from elsewhere, rather than originated group-internally, with the social distance traversed in order to acquire them contributing to their value. In part this follows from difficulties of mobility due not to the renowned ruggedness of the New Guinea landscape but to the vulnerability associated with traveling across other peoples' lands. Safe movement beyond one's home locality was traditionally structured according to *roads*, which represent both real, physical pathways and series of inter-locality relationships, so that the further out along the road one went from home the more social capital in the form of "road friends" or allies one could be inferred to have. It was therefore an Arapesh cultural disposition to associate the self with markers of foreignness; leading one early ethnographer (Mead 1938) to describe Arapesh as "an importing culture". In Melanesia, languages as codes and high-status speech genres such as songs, magic spells, and oratory are among the cultural forms that acquire value through this partly practical, partly symbolic system, which has been convincingly argued to have reflexes in grammatical structure (Aikhenvald 2007). But with the cessation of warfare brought about by colonial control and the subsequent formation of an encompassing state, the obstacles to travel and thus cultural importation are no longer in place, so that the English-based contact language Tok Pisin, which is associated with Europeans and hence the greatest possible social distance, can be—and has been—readily learned by all (Dobrin 2014: 143). When the state-based hierarchization of language (described below) was superimposed upon this acquisitive ethos, it led to the rapid and dramatic shift to Tok Pisin that has taken place throughout the region.

The cultural symbolic drivers of shift can also change over time: what causes language loss may be quite independent from what motivated and sustained multilingualism beforehand. This means that shift can not only mean different things across cultures, but within them over the time course, even in adjacent generations. An example is the case of Mexicano (Nahuatl) in Central Mexico. After centuries of coexistence with Spanish, a reinterpretation of Mexicano-Spanish bilingualism in the later 20th century led the next generation to shift. In their 1986 book, *Speaking Mexicano*, Jane and Kenneth Hill show how Spanish code-switching and borrowing changed in meaning when a new generation of middle-aged Mexicano men latched onto it as a way to challenge the authority of their elders, who displayed their power and knowledge through their control of Spanish forms. This intergenerational dynamic was reflected in the discourse around code switching and borrowing, leading to a reinterpretation of the use of Spanish forms as "contamination". The purist movement that resulted raised the bar for speaking the native language so high that the youth dared speak only Spanish, lest they be subject to sanction for their "impure" Mexicano.

With the centrality of cultural meanings in mind, we can revisit what is often considered the single greatest influence on language vitality, economics, with an acknowledgment that it, too, is symbolically mediated:

[C]ompared to the majority/dominant population, local community members are relatively powerless politically, and are less educated, less wealthy... with less access to modern conveniences and technologies.... [T]his socially disadvantaged position becomes associated with... the local language and culture, and so knowledge of the local language *is seen as* an impediment to social and economic development. Socioeconomic improvement thus comes to be *perceived as* tied to knowledge of the language of wider communication, coupled with renunciation of the local language and culture. (Grenoble 2011: 34, emphases ours)

People's linguistic practices become bound up with the unifying hierarchy of the state, such that linguistic differences "cease to be incommensurable particularisms" and instead come to be interpreted as inferior deviations from legitimate or standard forms of speech (Bourdieu 1982: 54). Imagine a cone on a three-dimensional graph: the further some form of linguistic expression diverges from the standard-language center, the further it falls on the scale of value (Silverstein 2017: 135). It is this whole cultural system, which Dorian (1998), following Grillo (1989), calls an "ideology of contempt" for non-dominant languages, that has been exported by Europeans throughout the world along with their standardized languages at the top. The symbolic nature of even economically motivated shift is demonstrated by how often "marginalized groups remain marginalized" even after they shift: "There is no convincing evidence that the shift to another language or repertoire yields real—as opposed to imagined or desired—socioeconomic advantages. These ideas operate at the ideological level... [and] are in many contexts not grounded in real economic gains" (Lüpke 2015: 72).

3. Documentation and Preservation Because the research process often involves direct, intense, instrumental interaction that brings people together across cultures, the way cultural meanings bear on language documentation and preservation are too numerous to adequately survey. They range from how the technologies of writing and recording are understood, to notions about the relation between self and outsider that are brought to the fore in both linguistic fieldwork and language shift, to the assessment of what constitutes an appropriate or authoritative speaker. As with the influences on language shift, the meanings that will be relevant in a particular situation cannot be presupposed, but they can be discovered through attentive observation as the research process unfolds. Here we present just a handful of cases that illustrate how local understandings can influence language documentation as an activity, as well as its products.

While documenting the Teop language of Bougainville, Papua New Guinea, Mosel (2015) found that local research assistants editing transcripts of recorded legends for community distribution were creating an entirely new linguistic register that drew not just on project goals but on local ideas of what writing or storytelling should be like. For example, they often made constructions more complex by explicitly marking the links between clauses or by combining them into a single clause. Similarly, while archiving a set of Bukiyip Arapesh texts that had been collected by another linguist and transcribed by native speakers in the 1970s, Dobrin (2017) discovered that the transcripts diverged from the audio recordings they were based on in numerous ways. Borrowed elements were replaced with their vernacular equivalents, obscuring the extent to which the influence of Tok Pisin had already advanced at that time; canonical Melanesian discourse forms

such as tail-head linked structures had their redundancy removed, and turns by non-focal participants were left untranscribed despite being critical for understanding the meaning of the text. Departures such as these result in something other than “documentation” as that term is now understood, but as Mosel (2015) points out, they do offer an interesting new angle from which to explore local understandings of the relation between spoken language and writing.

The responses of linguistic consultants may reflect their habituation to methods used in prior research projects, or to parallel-feeling activities like classroom instruction or local socialization practices. For example, where prior research has involved eliciting translations of sentences through a contact language, speakers may understand the goal of linguistic research to *always* be the provision of such translations. When Sicoli began building a video corpus of spontaneous Zapotec interactions after several years of collecting texts, eliciting vocabulary, and conducting psycholinguistic experiments, he found that the linguistic consultants he had worked with on the prior projects had to go through a period of adjustment to the new work style (Sicoli ms.). Community responses to the project were also shaped by people’s past experiences with language work. While many appreciated having a video corpus that showed the language in use in everyday life, others, who had learned to value the more formal kind of speech that is produced through elicitation, commented that there were “better” examples of Zapotec to be found than the ones in the recordings. Sicoli and Kaufman’s (2017) use of a standard survey instrument to elicit Zapotec and Chatino-language utterances through Spanish prompts offers another example of how the documentation process can be shaped by local participants’ understandings. When elder speakers worked with younger interviewers, they sometimes responded with imperative forms regardless of what inflection was implied by the prompt, as the situation seemed to them like an appropriate one in which to express their linguistic authority by using the language to tell the interviewer what to do. These speakers were responding not just to the prompts, but to the wider social configuration in which the research was taking place, as they interpreted it.²

Who counts as a native speaker for purposes of language work, and when and where they consider it appropriate to inhabit the speaker’s role, is another area where local understandings can challenge linguists’ assumptions. It might be preferable from the linguist’s point of view to work with speakers who command a wide range of registers, have the ability to express themselves using complex constructions, and exhibit minimal interference from the phonology and vocabulary of a contact language. But the community may prioritize other considerations. Myaamia language activist Daryl Baldwin said that being “able to explain what they were saying with some cultural context” was a more important criterion for speakerhood than being able to “hold extended conversation... in the language”; similarly, Warm Spring Language Program Director Myra Johnson said, “If they speak a broken Native American language, then maybe that’s how they learned it”, so it should not preclude them from serving as a linguistic expert (Leonard and Haynes 2010: 285). Evans (2001) writes about the challenge of determining who is a speaker of Australian Aboriginal languages, where linguistic authority or “ownership” is based not on fluency but on affiliation with the kin group on whose lands the language was traditionally spoken. He also shows how speakerhood

²Briggs 1986 offers an extended argument that the format of “the interview” (including of course the linguistic elicitation interview) is too often taken for granted, when it is actually shaped by participants’ interpretations of what is happening as a communicative event. These interpretations have implications for the social roles the participants inhabit, the speaking styles they use, the interactional goals they aim to achieve, etc.

can change qualitatively when, for example, someone with a greater right to language ownership passes away, leaving another speaker closer than they had been to the center of linguistic authority, or when what he calls an “amplifier” is present. An amplifier may have only partial skills, but the presence of such a person may draw out others who have greater fluency but would be unable or hesitant to use the language on their own.

When conducting documentary linguistic fieldwork on the Yopno language in Papua New Guinea, Slotta (2015) found that he was repeatedly being offered the same narrative to record: a story about an American who had cared for a member of his host family during WWII. Recording the same story over and over seemed like a waste of scarce battery power and did not serve the goals of a project that was meant to document speech across a range of topics and genres. But it eventually dawned on Slotta that the story was not being offered to serve the documentary record. Rather, it was being told to justify his close association with one particular household in the village, the one in which he lived, since this arrangement skewed his exchange relations to that family’s benefit. From the speakers’ point of view, repeating this story was not inefficient language documentation but a strategy for maintaining community harmony by justifying the present situation through reference to past events. Local understandings of the researcher’s presence as a person cannot be separated from the research process, and can even give shape to the documentary material collected. Slotta’s Yopno interlocutors also enthusiastically told him stories that are not normally shared outside of clans and lineages, and many of the storytellers were adamant that these secret clan histories should be made public in digital archives. They did this because they believed computers had the power to reveal hidden knowledge and so might confirm or even fill in missing details, which could support their claims to land. So participants in the documentation project were pursuing their own interests according to their own understanding of how the world works, which had little to do with the linguist’s understanding or the goal of preserving language and culture. This case shows how documentation of situated speech may simultaneously document an encounter between cultural perspectives.

In his 1998 article about “the Yellowman Tapes,” folklorist Barre Toelken explains his decision not to preserve the collection of audio recorded Navajo texts he had made over the course of his 30-year career. The concern was not his rights over the recordings, but the potential hazards of the powerful speech they capture when one cannot be sure where or when it will be respoken. In Navajo linguistic cosmology speech does not just describe reality, it creates it: the release of utterances into the air is understood to act directly on nature, including on the spirits of living beings. So the Coyote stories featured most prominently in Toelken’s recordings—which are felt to be edifying precisely because they dramatize problematic or inappropriate scenarios—could result in a dangerous disequilibrium if they were replayed in the wrong circumstances, for example out of season.³ Moreover, replaying the recordings would now bring hearers in contact with the voices of the dead, something many Navajos try to avoid. So while Toelken recognized the unfortunate loss to knowledge that his decision entailed, he felt the only justifiable course of action was to accede to his Navajo interlocutors’ wishes and return the recordings to them rather than preserve them in an archive.

Our final illustration of the cultural complexities of documentation and preservation comes from Blumenthal’s (2011) work in the Loba community of Lo Monthang, Nepal, where she recorded a repertoire of historically significant ritual songs called Garlu. The

³Toelken 1996 discusses how his own repeated playing of the recordings over his research and teaching career had precisely this effect, bringing physical harm and even loss of life to some of his close Navajo associates.

musicians who sang these songs were originally Muslims who had long been incorporated into this Buddhist community, but they continued to handle instruments like cowhide drums that were untouchable by others, and these practices were seen to justify their place in the lowest caste of the social hierarchy. In part because of their lowly, even shameful social status, the musician class was dwindling as sons opted to leave their remote community to work as contract laborers for the U.S. military in Iraq and Afghanistan or join the Maoist party rather than take up their inherited place as musicians at the center of their village's ritual functioning. The Loba diaspora living in New York were nostalgic about their heritage and concerned about its loss, so they were grateful that Blumenthal had agreed to work with a local musician in Lo Monthang to make CDs and a songbook they could distribute and listen to remotely. The primary village musician appreciated the positive attention and welcomed the opportunity to document his songs. But Blumenthal found that her work was creating problems back in the village. If the actual musicians were expendable, it only further justified the wider community's derisive attitude toward them. At the same time, it created anxiety among the villagers about the continuity of their way of life, because the one expert musician who remained was still regularly playing in rituals that were considered necessary for the whole community's purity. So in this situation, the activity of documenting and preserving the Garlu repertoire was difficult to dissociate from the social position of the musicians who performed it, local spiritual beliefs and practices, and the changing social structure and geographic dispersal of the community.

4. Revitalization If symbolically organized cultural meanings play a role in language shift and documentation, then it should not come as a surprise that they also have an important role to play in language revitalization, something also noted in Leonard's (2017: 19) call for linguists to open themselves to "Indigenous definitions of 'language'". The following examples make clear how this is so.

For the contemporary Garifuna community in Guatemala studied by Alison Broach, shift away from Garifuna is experienced as disruptive to communal harmony because it cuts people off from their dead ancestors, who continue to participate in social life by advising and reprimanding their descendants in Garifuna through dreams and ritual trances. This moral imperative for young people to listen to ancestors' voices has in turn influenced community efforts to address the problem of language shift as they experience it. Revitalization workshops are configured like spirit possession rituals, with elders conversing with youth and offering them guidance in Garifuna in a familial setting, just as the dead do when they ritually connect with their living kin. As Broach (2017) points out, having a culturally significant population of speakers *who are also dead* adds a whole new dimension of complexity to the problem of assessing speaker numbers.

Josh Wayt's work with members of the Dakota community at Lake Traverse Reservation similarly points to the primacy of moral meanings in regard to changing language practices. Why exactly are Lake Traverse residents so invested in revitalizing their native language? After all, this is a community coping with seemingly more pressing social problems like drug abuse and violence, and its culturally distinctive identity is strong even without the language because of the continued vibrancy of spiritual and ceremonial life. What Wayt (2018) observes is that in Lake Traverse, elders' (and, more generally, teachers') talk about the Dakota language—down to lessons on grammatical patterns like morpheme order—is loaded with references to moral relations with kin. This is in line with traditional methods of teaching and correcting, which tend to be highly

indirect. In other words, the local investment in the native language *is* actually targeting the most pressing social problems by scaffolding a discourse about moral relations within the community. To be considered successful in this setting, language revitalization will entail so much more than the acquisition of language skills. In fact, what it entails is so different that Leonard (2017) proposes a separate name for it: not “revitalization” but “reclamation”.

5. Conclusion We have aimed to show here that documentary linguistics and related practical efforts like language preservation and reversing language shift that take “action on language” (Costa 2016: 2) must recognize the meanings language has for local actors, as these inevitably form the backdrop, if not the foreground, for such efforts. What makes this a challenge is that cultural meanings—as with those that guide linguists’ own goals and behaviors—may not be readily articulable, and so cannot necessarily be queried through interviews or similarly direct methods. Moreover, local cultural meanings interconnect language with other domains like kinship, gender, age, spiritual beliefs, morality, and so on, creating webs of symbolic relations that can be hard to disentangle from one another and from those features that seem more obviously to be “about language”. But linguists’ assumptions about where the limits of language are, or ideas about what the goals and effects of language documentation work should be, may or may not align with those held by those most immediately involved. Thus, reading available ethnographic work on the relevant region and integrating research practices like participant observation into language documentation can both help researchers respond appropriately to the wider ethnolinguistic scene and refrain from reproducing boundaries between domains that are only artifacts of the historical division separating linguistics from other disciplines since Saussure. In the twenty years since Himmelmann first proposed that linguists construe language documentation as its own subfield of linguistics there has been talk about forging such connections between disciplines, but perhaps because institutions are so reified and disciplinary cultures slow to change, linguistics has still not fully taken to heart the lessons of anthropological ethnography that foster exploration of the patterns that connect seemingly disparate domains. Finding ways to overcome the artificial and unhelpful boundaries between linguistics and anthropology remains a continuing challenge.

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